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Reagan stokes up comeback effort, withdraws Gates

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President Reagan stepped up efforts to rebuild his battered administration yesterday by withdrawing his nomination of Robert Gates to head the CIA and scheduling an address to the nation on the Iran-Contra affair.

Newly installed White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker, in his first official appearance, defended Mr. Reagan against charges that he is "a hands-off leader" and an "AWOL president."

Mr. Baker said the president would give a "marvelous" speech to the nation at 9 p.m. tomorrow in response to scathing criticism from the board he appointed to investigate the Iran-Contra scandal.

The 61-year-old former senator, who took over as the top White House aide after Donald Regan was unceremoniously dismissed Friday, conceded the report of the Tower commission had damaged the president.

"But I think it is more important that he

survived, and I think he's going to grow from this point and strengthen his popularity and resume his role as a very effective president of the United States," Mr. Baker said.

White House officials have said Mr. Reagan was stunned and deeply disturbed by the board's depiction Thursday of his Iran initiative as a misguided policy run amok thanks to the efforts of out-of-control national security aides.

In his first session before the White House press corps, a relaxed and personable Mr. Baker also announced that the president had regretfully accepted Mr. Gates' request to withdraw his nomination as CIA chief. Confirmation hearings had bogged down over Mr. Gates' role in the Iran affair and congressmen urged Mr. Reagan to select someone "untainted" by the episode.

Mr. Gates' action spared the president the embarrassment of having to withdraw the nomination himself.

Mr. Baker said the White House was considering several names but

did not yet have an acceptance. Sources said the front-runners were former Sen. John Tower and former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, both of whom served on the president's Iran-Contra review board.

Mr. Gates, a 20-year-veteran of the CIA, will remain as assistant director.

"It is apparent that there is a strong sentiment in the Senate to await completion, at a minimum, of the work of the Senate Select Committee on Iran before acting on my nomination," Mr. Gates said in a letter to the president. "I believe a prolonged period of uncertainty would be harmful to the CIA, the intelligence community and potentially to our national security."

Mr. Reagan called Mr. Gates a "remarkably talented and dedicated man."

"I have been impressed with the class he has shown under the enormous pressures of recent weeks," he said in a statement read to reporters.

Mr. Baker got off to a good start on his first day. Smiling and obviously enjoying himself, he used his wit and good nature to field some difficult questions about Mr. Reagan's attention to business and the first lady.

Asked if he stood by a quote attributed to him in Sunday's Miami Herald that "the president has a half-life memory" and that "the first lady, when she gets her hackles up, can be a dragon."

"Sure," said Mr. Baker. "What I said was that in my experience as majority leader I found that the president was as good as anybody on issues, but when you approached him about it two weeks or two months later, you found that the half-life of that memory was short. But so is mine, and so is yours, I suspect."

"The first lady is a distinguished

citizen of this nation, she's a great lady and she obviously is a lady of strong convictions. That's what I meant."

Mr. Baker drew laughter when he said he hadn't had a chance to talk to Nancy Reagan all day and then pretended to flinch as he said, "There's the phone now!"

The contrast yesterday was strong between Mr. Baker's folksy style and the tough-guy approach Mr. Regan had used in every White House contact except those with the president. The former Tennessee senator started off his briefing by saying he intended to come back as often as circumstances warrant.

In his vigorous defense of Mr. Reagan, faulted by the Tower commission for his detachment from and disinterest in the execution of the Iran policy, Mr. Baker said, "I've been with the president off and on all day in a series of meetings."

"I've known Ronald Reagan since 1966 and I've never seen him more

energetic, fully engaged and more in command with the difficult circumstances and questions we were dealing with this day.

"Uppermost in many peoples' minds is the question: Is this president fully in control of his presidency? Is he alert? Is he fully engaged? Is he in contact with the problems? And I'm telling you, it's just one day's experience and maybe that's not enough, but today he was

superb," Mr. Baker said.

He used humor to defuse questions about Mrs. Reagan and her role in engineering the departure of the authoritarian Mr. Regan, including her legendary addiction to the telephone.

"I've known Nancy Reagan a long time, too. I did speak to her on Friday and I expect that — there's the phone now!"

Mr. Baker said he did not intend to

be another "prime minister," a common description of the imperious way in which Mr. Regan approached the job.

"I am acutely aware that Ronald Reagan is president and I am not," he said. "I will consult with the president's friends and advisers, and I will help him, if he will permit me to, to devise a strategy to get across to the country the perception of Ronald Reagan that I saw today."